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Our Truth, Our Stories: Uplifting community narratives in Washington, D.C.

Since 2020, ideas42 has collaborated with Washington D.C. residents and local organizations to use insights from behavioral science to uplift narratives of collective care, solidarity, and generosity. Our goal is to challenge and counter the false and harmful narratives surrounding poverty that often lead to misguided social policies. In the first phase of this work, we partnered with local organizations and community members to co-create the “Our Truth, Our Stories” event, which reimaged narratives about poverty by highlighting community stories from Southeast D.C. Our work in D.C. contributes to a multi-year, multi-city effort across the United States that is transforming harmful narratives about poverty and ultimately contributing to narratives that center agency, dignity, and collective well-being.

Why poverty narratives?

Humans are meaning-making creatures. Through narratives—collections of stories that share a common set of values and inform a course of action—we are able to process information and make sense of the world around us.

Some of the most deeply held narratives are about poverty: why it exists, why it persists, and what should be done about it. Many of these narratives are based on **demonstrably false tropes and harmful stereotypes**. These narratives make their way into the public imagination and directly influence how we vote, and in turn how policies are designed and implemented. They also influence how we treat others and how we think about ourselves. When policies and programs are based on false narratives, they're less effective at addressing poverty, and in some cases, can perpetuate or exacerbate it.

In 2020, ideas42 began applying our understanding of human behavior and decision-making to **help shift these false and harmful narratives**. Working with partners who bring expertise in narrative change, the nuances of communities' contexts, and crucial lived experience with the impacts of poverty, our goal is to increase support for social policies and programs that reflect and address poverty's true root causes. Our collaborations with communities and organizations across the U.S. will allow us to reimagine and rewrite narratives about poverty in order to

Highlights

- *ideas42 partnered with D.C. residents and local organizations to create “Our Truth, Our Stories,” an event that amplified community narratives to challenge harmful stereotypes about poverty.*
- *Behavioral insights informed our approach to challenge biases and reinforce themes of solidarity and truth.*
- *The event strengthened connections among participants, encouraging dialogue and reflection on poverty's true causes and the importance of collective care.*

make more effective public programs possible, and ultimately build a society that truly gives everyone a fair shot at a fulfilled life of their own definition.

Dismantling harmful narratives in Washington, D.C.

In Washington, D.C., we formed a Local Narrative Team (LNT) composed of four local organizations working to promote community well-being and health equity. Together, we developed a research agenda, research tools, and a narrative change campaign to uplift authentic community narratives.

In our initial research, we conducted local and national surveys, qualitative interviews, and open-ended questionnaires. While D.C. residents endorsed harmful narratives about poverty at lower rates than the national average, we nevertheless identified two highly endorsed narratives about poverty: **meritocracy** and **welfare exploitation**. The meritocracy narrative suggests that success can be achieved through hard work alone, while the welfare exploitation narrative claims that people intentionally misuse the system. **These narratives are harmful** because they claim that poverty is the result of a lack of effort and that the solution to poverty is individual perseverance. They also assume that personal characteristics and moral failings define people's life outcomes without acknowledging the greater historical and sociopolitical context.

Designing “Our Truth, Our Stories”

Identifying common false narrative themes allowed the LNT to move forward with articulating and elevating counternarratives in their place. To do so, we delved into the firsthand life experience, expertise, and values carried by individuals and community members who are mostly impacted by false narratives of meritocracy and welfare exploration. To ground our research, we facilitated a series of Community Narrative Circles—freeform discussions focused on community building—with residents of the southeast quadrant of D.C., the area with the highest rates of poverty in the city. Through these Circles, two core sets of values emerged:

- ▶ **Solidarity and Community:** Defined as a shared belief in interdependence, where caring for others and being generous signify solidarity and belonging.
- ▶ **Standing in Your Truth:** Living with honesty and being true to oneself without fear, especially when speaking out about individual and community needs.

In these circles, we turned to the questions, “What narratives do we want to uplift instead? How can we articulate a counternarrative statement that captures the values of solidarity and community, and standing in one's truth?” Through these conversations, we co-developed the following counternarrative:

“Poverty is a universal issue that affects everyone in D.C., directly and indirectly. Society designs and maintains systems of oppression that keep people living in poverty; these systems disproportionately affect the Black communities in D.C. By working collectively, Black communities in D.C. can identify, call out, and dismantle the systems of oppression that keep people in poverty.”

We used this guiding narrative, insights from research, co-design sessions with the LNT and community members, and behavioral science evidence to create “Our Truth, Our Stories.” This multi-pronged cultural intervention centered and amplified the stories of those with lived experiences of poverty by creating a safe space for storytelling and celebration of Southeast D.C. residents.

Ten community storytellers participated in storytelling workshops as part of the Community Narrative Circles. During the workshops, they shared personal stories from their lives that reflected community values and uplifted the counternarrative. Along with the storytelling, the event also featured live Go-Go music, facilitated conversations, and postcards to reflect on their experiences, aiming to make the counternarratives more salient.

By engaging the community at large and leveraging behavioral principles, “Our Truth, Our Stories” offered a reflective, cathartic, and safe environment for community members to reflect on the impact of harmful narratives and engage in dialogue and celebration about the truth of their community.

Leveraging behavioral science

Behavioral science, the study of how people make decisions and take action in the real world, offers an innovative lens for understanding and dismantling harmful narratives. Our initial research revealed three psychological tendencies that contribute to the perpetuation of harmful poverty narratives. “Our Truth, Our Stories” integrated strategies to directly address these three tendencies:

TABLE 1: BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE ELEMENTS AND PRINCIPLES

Design Element	Psychology Theory or Tool	Change Strategy
First-person storytelling	<i>Fundamental Attribution Error</i>	Fundamental attribution error is the tendency to attribute others’ behavior to their character rather than to external circumstances outside of their control. In our interviews, some people described poverty as a consequence of character flaws, such as laziness or complacency. Local residents simultaneously acknowledged the systemic and historical factors contributing to poverty but were unaware of the contradiction. To counteract fundamental attribution error driving endorsement of these harmful narratives, we leveraged the practice of perspective-giving, using first-person storytelling to create a more impactful and authentic narrative in the minds of participants and reduce the likelihood that they would insert their own biases or preconceptions (Kalla & Broockman, 2023 and Bruneau and Saxe, 2012).

Design Element	Psychology Theory or Tool	Change Strategy
Unifying cultural elements	<i>In-group/Out-group Bias</i>	In-group/out-group bias is the tendency to favor people perceived as belonging to one’s own group (in-group) while displaying less favorable attitudes towards members of other groups (the out-group). This can happen in any setting where there are noticeable differences between groups of people. Surveys measuring support for group-based inequalities indicate that the more respondents perceived people experiencing poverty as part of a different group, the more likely they were to endorse harmful narratives. To address this bias, “Our Truth, Our Stories” used storytelling to highlight that everyone, regardless of their background, requires support from others at some point in their lives. We also included elements that reflect the city’s culture, such as stories of solidarity and Go-Go music played by a local band. Similarly, the practice of perspective-taking humanizes people considered to be in an outgroup and reduces stigma towards a group considered “other” (Tompkins et al., 2015). Through facilitated conversations following the storytelling performances, participants put themselves into the shoes of the storytellers and shared moments from their own lives where they connected or resonated with the storytellers’ stories.
Postcard reminders and guided reflection	<i>Negativity Bias and Availability Heuristic</i>	Negativity bias is the tendency to weigh negative events more heavily than positive ones in our minds. Meanwhile, the availability heuristic is the tendency to estimate the prevalence of something—like crime, poverty, or fraud—based on how easy it is to remember examples of it. Together, these two biases often skew our perception of the world and those around us. To counteract this, we provided reminders in the form of postcards that celebrated collective care, solidarity, and generosity. At the end of the event, we encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences, with the aim of making these counternarratives more accessible and widely shared, thereby challenging the prominence of negative perceptions.

Impact of “Our Truth, Our Stories”

To evaluate the impact of the event, we used a combination of research methods. For quantitative analysis, we employed a quasi-experimental design to compare a treatment group and a control group on several variables, including endorsement of harmful narratives, support for public benefits programs, and prosocial behavior. The treatment group consisted of individuals who attended “Our Truth, Our Stories,” while the control group included those who registered but did not attend. We also collected qualitative feedback from attendees through a short questionnaire at the end of the event and invited the storytellers to share their reflections on participating in the storytelling workshops and performing their stories.

Our quantitative analysis showed a modest decrease in the endorsement of harmful narratives compared to the control group. However, the results were not conclusive due to the small sample size. On the other hand, the qualitative feedback provided a more in-depth understanding of the event's impact; storytellers expressed a feeling of closeness and bonding among the group, appreciating the connections that were developed during the workshops, while attendees shared positive feedback on the event's emotional resonance, noting how it facilitated a deeper understanding and empathy towards the experiences of others.

Given the small sample size, we cannot definitively state how the event might have changed people's views on poverty, but the qualitative feedback provides insight into the event's impact. Participants emphasized the importance of community engagement, building connections, and fostering understanding among diverse individuals, with solidarity and generosity being recurring themes. Storytellers felt empowered to continue sharing their stories, while attendees noted feeling moved by the event and experiencing a heightened sense of connectedness and hope.

Where we go from here

In our next phase of work, we will continue shifting harmful narratives related to poverty, with a particular focus on changing narratives around gun violence to increase support for prevention efforts that prioritize community investment.

Simultaneously, we are enhancing our methods for measuring how narratives show up and shift over time. This includes the use of techniques like natural language processing to analyze how narratives circulate in mainstream media, alongside audience segmentation based on psychological and sociological variables.

Our narrative change efforts extend beyond D.C. We are conducting similar narrative change work in [different cities across the U.S.](#), using the lens of behavioral science to transform public understandings of poverty.

Interested in our work? If you'd like to work with us, please reach out to Eva Matos at ematos@ideas42.org.

Appendix

In the research phase, we conducted two research activities:

1 Qualitative interviews

- ▶ 10 interviews
- ▶ Conducted from November 2021 - February 2022
- ▶ All conducted virtually
- ▶ All interviewees were Washington, D.C. Wards 7 and 8 residents
- ▶ All interviewees were compensated \$50 for their time
- ▶ Racial breakdown: All interviewees were Black or African American
- ▶ Gender breakdown: 9 women, 1 man

Probed on themes of:

- General attitudes about poverty
- Experience receiving public benefits
- Attitudes towards immigration
- Perception of DC identity and community values

2 An online survey

- ▶ Open from August 3 - September 7, 2021
- ▶ 51 respondents
- ▶ Racial breakdown:
Black: 44.7%, White: 42.2%,
Asian: 2.8%, Other: 6.6%
- ▶ Gender breakdown:
Female: 55.8%, Male: 41.3%,
Gender non-conforming: 2.6%

Topics surveyed included:

- Endorsement of narrative statements, such as:
 - “If I lived in poverty, I would put in the work to get out of poverty instead of just looking for a handout.”
 - “Plenty of people have pulled themselves out of their situation; if they could, so can you.”
 - “Poverty is a combination of not wanting to work and being irresponsible.”
- Worldview and ideologies